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**Drivers and Outcomes of Work Alienation: Reviving a Concept**

Amanda Shantz<sup>1</sup>

Management Department, IESEG School of Management (LEM-CNRS)

1 Parvis de la Defense, 92044 Paris la Défense

Tel: +33 1 55 91 10 10

*E-mail: [a.shantz@ieseg.fr](mailto:a.shantz@ieseg.fr)*

Kerstin Alfes

Tilburg University, Department of Human Resource Studies

Warandelaan 2, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands

Tel: + 31 13 466 2499

*E-mail: [k.alfes@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:k.alfes@tilburguniversity.edu)*

Catherine Truss

Business School, University of Sussex

Jubilee Building Jub-109, Falmer

Brighton, BN1 9RH

Tel: +44 (0) 1273 872582

*E-mail: [k.truss@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:k.truss@sussex.ac.uk)*

Emma Soane

Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE

Tel: +44 (0)20 7405 7686

*E-mail: [e.c.soane@lse.ac.uk](mailto:e.c.soane@lse.ac.uk)*

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author

“Alienation” is a nearly forgotten concept in mainstream management. The reasons are understandable, yet nonetheless specious. The notion of alienation became popularised through the sociological and political writings of Karl Marx, whose theory denouncing capitalism has since been heavily criticised in Euro Western society (Maynard Keynes, 1936; Popper, 2002; Rand, 1979), and oftentimes blamed as a source of global conflict and strife (e.g., World War II, Vietnam War; Rotter, 1999). The concept’s relationship to socialism and communism has caused a reticence amongst management scholars to study it.

Indeed, today’s organisational scholars, especially those in management, might be less comfortable with the political under-gridding of the concept of alienation. The move toward more conservative politics in the broader international arena may be influential in the theories adopted by management academics. We argue for the revival of alienation. This is because, unlike more commonly used management theories (e.g., engagement, motivation), alienation is not just about workers’ experience of employment. The concept of alienation invites scholars and practitioners to engage in dialogue regarding the influence of the political and social structure of the employment relationship. External factors need to be taken into account in examining the employment relationship, alongside those that are internal to the organisation. Bringing the political and social nature of employment back to the forefront of analysis is crucial given today’s current context, including the global recession of 2009-2011, Occupy Wall Street and its proliferations in cities across North America and Europe, and the Arab Spring of 2011.

The purpose of this research is to refocus attention on important insights that can be gleaned from investigations into work alienation. Doing so is timely given the publication of a meta-analysis highlighting the relevance of alienation to management (Chiaburu, Thundiyil, & Wang, 2014). In the present study, we identify and test four antecedents of alienation, namely, autonomy, variety, task identity, and social relationships at work. Although previous

research has reported that alienation is inversely related to a handful of these work characteristics (e.g., Banai & Reisel, 2007; Banai, Reisel, & Probst, 2004), these studies have either used a multidimensional measure of alienation, or a measure of alienation that is too broad in focus. In the present study, a validated, uni-dimensional measure of alienation is used (Nair & Vohra, 2009). Moreover, no other study, to our knowledge, has simultaneously assessed these four precursors of alienation.

In addition, we test the notion, supported by theoretical (Mitchell, 1984; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and empirical work (Chisholm & Cummings, 1979; Clark, Halbesleben, Lester, & Heintz, 2010; Suraez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2007) that alienation leads to higher levels of deviance, and lower levels of performance. Although it is common parlance in the social sciences to discuss the negative repercussions of alienation for organisations, few studies have empirically examined such relationships.

In summary, the present study contributes to the literature by examining a fully integrated model of alienation by simultaneously examining four theoretically-derived antecedents of alienation, and the impact of alienation on deviance and performance. It is noteworthy that deviance was measured 12 months after we measured alienation, and performance, as rated by employees' supervisors, was collected from the HR department.

### **Alienation**

The term alienation has a long history. Latin in origin, alienation features in the work of early theologians such as Calvin and Luther. Alienation, in theological terms, means an estrangement of humanity from God following Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden. Since then, scholars have studied how individuals become alienated from the social and political world, their work, and from themselves (Feuerlicht, 1978).

Hegel (1807/1977) is heralded as the fountainhead of conceptions of alienation. He introduced two German words, namely, 'Entfremdung' and 'Entäußerung' to refer to the

evolution of a person's 'spirit,' whereby a person's spirit experiences its own creations as alien, and then conquers such alienation from oneself through education, thereby achieving true reality and unity with oneself. Moses Hess and Karl Marx, members of the Hegelian left, applied the terms 'Entfremdung' and 'Entäußerung' to economic and social life. Hess (1843/1964) stated that a person in a capitalist state becomes alienated from his or her true being and society through the exchange of money.

Marx extended the concept of alienation beyond Hess's work in order to explain the relationship between capitalist production and alienation. In his early philosophical writings, Marx asserted that working is central to a person's self-concept and sense of wellbeing. In the process of creating products, individuals meet the needs of their own existence. People are inextricably intertwined with the products that they make; people "see their own reflection in a world which they have constructed" (Marx, 1844/1969, p. 278). However, according to Marx, the institution of capitalism has disturbed this natural arrangement. This means that an employee approaches his or her work only as a means of survival (rather than self-fulfillment), and does not derive personal satisfaction from work. This is because the product of a person's labour belongs to someone else. In other words, alienation arises due to a separation between capital and labour.

Other influential thinkers held similar opinions to Marx on alienation. For instance, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Émile Durkheim (1897/1951) used the term "anomie" which is often closely associated with alienation. Max Weber's (1902/1948) thoughts on an individual's lost universality, on rationalization, and the reduction of values, relationships, and culture to a monolithic, secular, utilitarian bureaucracy also dovetails with Marx's view of the present and future. Alexis de Tocqueville (1838/1961) spoke of the degradation of the increasingly specialised worker who no longer belongs to him or herself. Alienation as described by Sartre (1960) is very similar to Marx's views in that *l'enfer c'est les autres* (hell

is other people). Some of Kafka's (1946) work also touches on a similar vein in terms of the loss of individuality in the face of bureaucracy. Additionally, Marx was a familiar figure in Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1989) philosophical vocabulary, and Chomsky (1973) discussed how some cultures view all contract labour as a renunciation of freedom and as the seed of alienation from others.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, scholars in a number of disciplines have been inspired by the concept of alienation. Braverman (1974) asserted that alienation is a constant condition on humanity whereby all employees under a capitalist regime are alienated. Ollman (1976, p. 120) also pointed to the broader social and economic context as the root of alienation, whereby social conditions are said to create a "psychological and ideological superstructure which is practically the same for all men and caught up in a given set of material circumstances." Critical management scholars have built upon this work by promoting the emancipation from the relations of power through a critique of mainstream management research and teaching (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010; Russ, 2010). Related to this work is the perspective of critical human resource management (CHRM) scholars. They contest that mainstream human resource management (HRM) is dominated by a 'managerialist' concern to demonstrate that HRM practices lead to high levels of individual and organisational performance (Keenoy, 2009; Paauwe, 2004), despite the questionable nature of the evidence supporting such links (Guest & Bryson, 2009). In response to this imbalanced positioning in the literature, Delbridge and Keenoy (2010) advocated a critical account of HRM that takes into consideration the weaknesses which characterise mainstream scholarship, including its unitarist underpinning in that it ignores the inherent conflict of interest between capital and labour. Although this stream of work has taken the field a long way in theorizing about the political, social, and environmental causes of alienation, research in the field of social

psychology has taken a different approach to examining alienation. Scholars in this domain have examined alienation as a malleable social-psychological state.

These scholars do so because they are interested in understanding the psychological processes that govern social relations. Blauner (1964, p. xvi) stated that the “macro-sociological perspective...achieves its wide scope at the cost of investigating interpersonal relations in depth...the one perspective focuses on issues the other neglects. The macro perspective looks at social life from a distance to encompass the entire social structure in broad outline...The micro perspective examines social interaction at close range.” Blauner concluded that both perspectives are necessary in order to understand alienation.

Seeman’s work served as a springboard for much research on alienation in social psychology. He proposed that alienation is a multidimensional construct composed of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement. Past empirical studies have used this definition of alienation (Blauner, 1964; Sarros, Tanewski, Winter, Santora, & Densten, 2003; M. Seeman, 1975). However, most scholars have concluded that the core of alienation is uni-dimensional, rather than multi-dimensional, and lends itself to notions of self-estrangement (Kanungo, 1982; Mottaz, 1981; Twining, 1980).

Nair and Vohra (2009), like Schacht (1970) and Mottaz (1981), argued that the heart of alienation is estrangement, or a disconnection between a person and his or her work. They defined alienation as, “estrangement, or disconnection from work, the context, or self” (Nair & Vohra, 2009, p. 296). This definition is supported by Marx’s writing, whereby he stated that in the process of creating products, a person’s self is tied up with the object that is produced. Nair and Vohra (2009) developed a measure of alienation which reflects this sense of disconnection; this measure is used in the present study. Since most definitions of alienation refer to a sense of separation (e.g., Kanungo, 1979), the definition of alienation

used here is that it is a dissociate state of the individual in relation to the product or process of work.

### **Antecedents of Alienation**

#### **Autonomy**

Marx argued that people become alienated from work itself because they do not have discretion over the design and production of their work. Seeman (1959) drew from this argument in suggesting that alienation is a result of a person's powerlessness and frustration for the need for autonomy. Indeed, bureaucratic control has long been suspected of fostering alienation by reducing individual work freedom (Aiken & Hage, 1966; Blauner, 1964) and producing feelings of disempowerment (Gouldner, 1952).

Albrow (1970) suggested that a number of studies (e. g. Gouldner, 1952) were designed as ripostes to Weber's (1902/1948) treatise on bureaucracy. Some of these studies revealed the undesirable and unanticipated consequences of bureaucracy. Most of them have focused on two forms of bureaucratic control that contribute to feelings of alienation, namely, centralization of decision making (Aiken & Hage, 1966; Blauner, 1964; G. A. Miller, 1967), and formalization of rules and procedures (e. g. Aiken & Hage, 1966).

Rather than focusing on perceptions of centralization or formalization, the present study focuses on a related construct, namely, perceptions of decision-making autonomy. Decision-making autonomy refers to "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 162). Research has revealed that autonomy is positively associated with desirable job attitudes, behaviours and health. This is because autonomy in one's work provides the job holder with psychologically positive outcomes (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) since it elicits a sense of possible gain, agency and a means to act (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Spector's



(1986) meta-analysis revealed that autonomy was positively related a range of positive organisational and individual outcomes.

There are three published studies, to our knowledge, that have examined the effect of job autonomy on alienation. Although Nair and Vohra (2010) did not find a significant relationship between the two using a sample of Indian knowledge workers, Banai and Reisel (2007) and Banai, Reisel and Probst (2004) found that job autonomy was inversely related to alienation from society in a group of Russian and Hungarian workers, respectively. Although the latter two studies used Korman et al.'s (1981) measure of alienation, which has subsequently been criticised for being too broad and not specific to work alienation (Nair & Vohra, 2009), the results provide some indication that decision making autonomy is negatively related to work alienation. In light of this evidence, we hypothesise:

*Hypothesis 1: Decision making autonomy is negatively related to alienation.*

### **Task Variety**

According to Marx, employees who must complete a sequence of discrete, repetitive, and trivial tasks are more likely to be alienated at work. Adam Smith's (1776) exhaustive depiction of the tedium involved in creating sewing needles corroborates Marx's ideas about the alienating effect of monotonous tasks. Later, Braverman (1974) gave an account of the devastating effects of the detailed division of labour on human life, and the role of organisations in spreading this division.

Research in management has taken up this strand of reasoning through its examination of task variety, defined as the extent to which a job requires the completion of a variety of tasks, as opposed to a narrow range of tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Empirical studies have demonstrated that repetitive jobs lead job holders to experience psychological distress (Melamed, Ben-Avi, Luz, & Green, 1995), which may in turn cause them to cognitively disengage from work. Individuals who feel that they engage in a variety

of tasks, on the other hand, believe that their work is interesting (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) and motivational (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although Nair and Vohra (2010) did not find a significant relationship between the two, Banai et al. (2004) and Banai and Reisel (2007) found that task variety was negatively associated with alienation in samples of Eastern European workers. Hence, we hypothesise:

*Hypothesis 2: Task variety is negatively related to alienation.*

### **Task Identity**

Marx stated that a person's value consists of the ability to conceive of the ends of actions as purposeful ideas that are distinct and knowable at all points in the making of the product or idea. People desire to not only objectify the intentional efforts of themselves, but also see the entire product which is produced. Drawing from Marx, Seeman (1959) argued that individuals are alienated when they cannot see the relationship between their work and larger systems and processes. The extent to which workers relate to their tasks is a function of being able to see the end-to-end connection of their work; this resonates with Seeman's (1959) conceptualization of meaningfulness of work, and identification with work.

Management scholars have examined this issue and coined it, task identity. As a property of a job, task identity is defined as the extent to which a job involves the completion – from beginning to end – of an identifiable and visible piece of work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). For example, a job that involves the completion of a piece of work on a manufacturing assembly line has low levels of task identity.

In his depiction of America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, de Tocqueville (1838/1961) emphasised the importance of task identity when he observed the following of an alienated factory worker: "When a workman is unceasingly and exclusively engaged in the fabrication of one thing, he ultimately does his work with singular dexterity...he becomes more adroit and less industrious...As the principle of the division of labour is more extensively applied,

the workman becomes more weak, more narrow minded, and more dependent” (pp.190-91). In support of this, a meta-analysis conducted by Fried and Ferris (1987) found that task identity was the job characteristic most strongly related to job performance. Previous studies by Banai and Reisel (2003; 2007) found that task identity was negatively related to alienation among Cuban and Russian employees. Hence:

*Hypothesis 3: Task identity is negatively related to alienation.*

### **Social Support at Work**

Marx asserted that individuals become alienated from their work when they do not have a social connection with others who are involved in the production of work. Hence, a lack of meaningful relationships with other workers is the fourth driver of alienation. Alienation is driven by a lack of inter-connectedness with others who jointly create a product. Marx suggested that capitalism reduces labour to a commercial activity that can be traded, rather than a social relationship amongst people who are involved in a common effort. Hence, feeling disconnected from others at work may lead to alienation from a person’s job.

Research is beginning to accumulate that identifies social characteristics as important components of work (e. g. Grant, 2007; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). For example, the relationships among workers are one of the most important determinants of well-being and perceptions of meaningful work (e. g. Gersick, Dutton, & Bartunek, 2000). Supportive social relationships at work are expected to reduce job stress (e. g. Karasek, Triandis, & Chaudhry, 1982) and increase prosocial motivation (e. g. Grant, 2007).

There is little research that has investigated the role of a supportive environment in alleviating alienation at work. Three studies, however, are noteworthy. First, a study conducted by Korman et al. (1981) found that individuals who were dissatisfied with their relationships with others were more alienated. Second, Pearlin (1962) found that employees of a hospital who did not have a friend on the same ward were more alienated at work

compared to those who reported having a friend to work with. Third, Nair and Vohra (2010) found a negative relationship between satisfaction with work relationships and alienation. Therefore, we hypothesise:

*Hypothesis 4: Social support is negatively related to alienation.*

### **Alienation and Deviance**

Although Marx did not write extensively about deviance, more contemporary theorists have found his conceptions of class and conflict to be applicable to explaining deviance in modern society. Drawing from Merton's (1938) strain theory, Mitchell (1984) suggested that individuals cope with alienation by being "innovative" so that they can create situations at work that are meaningful to them. Although alienated individuals can find an outlet for creativity outside of their jobs (e.g., hobbies), they may also engage in deviant forms of creativity on the margins of, or within their job. For instance, in his analysis of employee-thieves, Zeitlin (1971, p. 24) found that stealing provided "significant job enrichment" which allowed employees to "take matters into his own hands, assume responsibility, make decisions and face challenges." Since the thieves in Zeitlin's study did not find their work interesting or challenging, they resorted to stealing company property in order to make decisions (i.e. what should be stolen) and face challenges (i.e. avoid getting caught). Studies have also found that alienation at work is positively related to aggression and resistance toward the organization (Jermier, 1988), and alcohol dependence (Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995; Melvin Seeman & Anderson, 1983). Moreover, Hochschild's (1983) account of resistance to emotional labour of flight attendants shows that alienated workers are reflexive and possess agency to challenge their alienation in deviant ways. Therefore, we hypothesise:

*Hypothesis 5: Alienation is positively related to deviance.*

### **Alienation and Task Performance**

The negative relationship between performance and alienation can, in part, be explained by affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This theory states that negative emotions drive lower levels of performance. According to Marx, alienation causes negative emotions because work has ceased to be a part of a worker's nature and "consequently...[the worker] has a feeling of misery rather than well-being [and] is physically exhausted and mentally debased [and] at work he feels homeless" (Marx, 1844/1969, p. 194). This argument is consistent with Seeman's (1967, p. 283) finding that alienation is positively related to a "diffuse disaffection" with work, and with the empirical findings of Shantz, Alfes and Truss (2014) who found that alienation is positively related to emotional exhaustion, and negatively related to wellbeing. In this case, then, alienation is predicted to negatively impact performance.

Although Marx was not concerned with the performance implications of alienation, subsequent studies have examined this relationship. To our knowledge, only three empirical studies have studied the relationship between constructs closely related to alienation and performance. Chisholm and Cummings (1979) demonstrated that powerlessness and meaninglessness (proxies for alienation) were negatively related to an individual's self-rated performance, and management potential and progression according to company records. In their analysis of survey data from high school teachers in Spain, Suárez-Mendoza and Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara (2007) found that powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement (designed to measure alienation) were negatively related to self-rated extra-role performance and mediated the link between employees' perceptions of person-organisation fit and organisational citizenship behaviour. Clark, Halbesleben, Lester, and Heintz (2010) found that temporary worker alienation was negatively related to self-report measures of job performance, but unrelated to supervisory-rated performance. We therefore extrapolate from

affective events theory and studies that have established a link between constructs related to alienation and performance to hypothesise that:

*Hypothesis 6: Alienation is negatively related to individual performance.*

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Respondents and Procedure**

The participants were 671 employees working for a construction and consultancy firm in the UK. Employees were informed about the purpose of the study and its confidentiality, and encouraged to complete an online questionnaire within two weeks. Employees were given time to complete the survey at work and asked to rate their jobs with regards to levels of decision-making autonomy, task variety, task identity, social support as well as the extent to which they felt alienated from their work as per the measures below. From our sample, 414 questionnaires were returned, constituting a response rate of 62%. Out of this sample, supervisory rated performance appraisal data was available for 283 employees. Twelve months after the first survey was administered, all employees who participated in the first survey were invited to take part in a second survey, following the same procedures used for the first survey. Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they engaged in deviant behaviours using the measure described below.

Two hundred employees completed the second survey, constituting a response rate of 48%; there were therefore 83 missing values for deviance. The matched sample comprised 31.8 percent women; the average age was 42.71 years ( $SD = 11.95$ ); the average tenure was 4.34 years ( $SD = 3.50$ ); and 99.2% of the sample was employed on a permanent, versus a fixed-term contract. The organization is composed of employees who work on construction and facility management projects. The employees worked in a variety of roles, including professional (38.6%), managerial (26.5), administrative (19.7%), customer service (3.8%),

elementary occupations, such as custodial workers (3.0%), and ‘other’ job types (8.4%). In terms of educational qualifications, 55.6% had a degree or equivalent, 11.3% had some form of higher education, 12.8% had A-levels or equivalent (e.g., pre-university courses), 12.0% had GCSE or equivalent (e.g., high school), 7.5% had other job related qualifications, and 0.8% had no qualifications.

## Measures

The response scales for all measures, unless otherwise noted, ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

***Decision making autonomy*** was measured with a three-item scale developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). A sample item is, “The job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own.” Cronbach alpha was 0.88.

***Task variety*** was measured with three items developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). A sample item is, “The job involves a great deal of task variety.” Cronbach alpha was 0.90.

***Task identity*** was measured with three items developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). A sample item is, “The job is arranged so that I can do an entire piece of work from beginning to end.” Cronbach alpha was 0.92.

***Social support*** was measured with three items developed by Morgeson and Humphrey (2006). A sample item is, “People I work with take a personal interest in me.” Cronbach alpha was 0.73.

***Alienation*** was measured with a three item, 7-point Likert type scale based on a scale developed and validated by Nair and Vohra (2009). A sample item is, “I feel disconnected from the events in my workplace.” Cronbach alpha was 0.81.

In order to ensure that the shortened version of the measure that was used in the present study had sound methodological properties, we carried out a confirmatory factor

analysis in AMOS and computed additional statistical tests to determine the convergent, discriminant and nomological validity of the shortened scale, following the procedures described by Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2009, pp. 709-710). The results supported the use of the shortened measure of alienation. Detailed results can be obtained from the authors.

Although we used this continuous measure in our analyses, we also transformed the variable to create a new, three-category variable to report the percentage of employees who were alienated from their job. The first category was composed of those who were, on average, in high to moderate agreement that their work was alienating (average of 5-7 on the alienation items). The second category was composed of those who were, on average, either low in agreement, or low in disagreement, with the alienation items (average of 3-4.99 on the alienation items). The third category was composed of those who reported, on average, that they disagreed that their work was alienating (scored 1-2.99 on the alienation items). The results showed that 16.5% of the sample was alienated, 41.4% were neutral, and 42.1% were not alienated from work.

***Workplace deviance*** was measured using 3 items developed by Lehman and Simpson (1992). Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which they engaged in deviant behaviour, such as spending work time on personal matters on a scale of 1 (never) to 7 (daily). Cronbach alpha was .79.

***Performance ratings*** were collected from the Human Resource Department's database of performance appraisals. Employees were assigned an overall grade of 'A,' 'B,' or 'C', with 'A' representing excellent performance. In the data analysis, A was assigned a numerical score of 3, B was assigned a score of 2, and C was scored as 1.

## Results

Table I presents the means and standard deviations for each scale, and inter-scale correlations for all study variables.



Insert Table I about here

### Measurement Models

We employed latent variable structural equation modeling (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) using maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 18.0 (Arbuckle, 2006) to evaluate the model. As the antecedents of alienation as well as the measures of alienation and deviance were collected from a single source, a series of confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to establish the discriminant validity of the scales. We calculated five fit indices to determine how the model fitted the data. For the  $\chi^2/df$ , values less than 2.5 indicate a good fit (Arbuckle, 2006). For the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) values greater than .9 represent a good model fit (Bentler, 1990), and for the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) values less than .08 indicate an acceptable model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1998).

First, a full measurement model was tested, in which all indicators were allowed to load onto their respective factors. All factors were allowed to correlate. The 6-factor model showed a very good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 175$ ;  $df = 120$ ; GFI = .91; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .06; CFI = .97). This model was compared to five alternative models, where (a) decision-making autonomy and task variety ( $\chi^2 = 441$ ;  $df = 125$ ; GFI = .78; RMSEA = .11; SRMR = .10; CFI = .85), (b) decision-making autonomy, task variety and task identity ( $\chi^2 = 887$ ;  $df = 129$ ; GFI = .67; RMSEA = .17; SRMR = .10; CFI = .64), (c) decision making autonomy, task variety, task identity and social support ( $\chi^2 = 966$ ;  $df = 132$ ; GFI = .65; RMSEA = .18; SRMR = .11; CFI = .60) and (d) decision making autonomy, task variety, task identity, social support and alienation ( $\chi^2 = 1149$ ;  $df = 134$ ; GFI = .61; RMSEA = .20; SRMR = .13; CFI = .51) were subsumed under one factor. Finally, we conducted Harman's single factor test in which all

items loaded onto one general factor ( $\chi^2 = 1328$ ;  $df = 135$ ;  $GFI = .57$ ;  $RMSEA = .21$ ;  $SRMR = .15$ ;  $CFI = .43$ ). The model fit of these alternative models was significantly worse compared to the full measurement model. This suggests that the variables in this study were distinct.

### **Structural Model**

In the next step, the full structural model was tested. Overall, our hypothesised model provided a good fit for our data ( $\chi^2 = 194$ ;  $df = 141$ ;  $GFI = .91$ ;  $SRMR = .06$ ;  $RMSEA = .04$ ;  $CFI = .97$ ) and the majority of the hypotheses were supported by the data. Task variety ( $\beta = -.21$ ) and task identity ( $\beta = -.16$ ) show a significant negative association with alienation. Hence, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were confirmed. Hypothesis 1, that decision making autonomy is negatively related to alienation, and Hypothesis 4, that social support is negatively related to alienation, were not supported by the data.

As we had hypothesised, alienation was negatively and significantly related to task performance as measured by supervisory ratings, and positively and significantly related to deviance, thereby confirming Hypotheses 5 and 6. With a standardised estimate of .31, the association between alienation and deviance was stronger compared to the association between alienation and task performance (-.16). The standardised estimates for the structural model are represented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

### **Discussion**

Although neighboring disciplines have recognised the importance of studying alienation, research on alienation in management has been limited. The purpose of the present study was to join a recent meta-analysis (Chiaburu et al., 2014) in revitalising the concept of alienation in the management sciences. This was accomplished by drawing on interpretations of the work of Marx that conjectured that decision-making autonomy, task variety, task identity, and social support at work are associated with alienation. This is the first study to

test these relationships simultaneously. By drawing from a rich scholarly history on alienation we have extended knowledge on the precursors of alienation at work. Our results showed that task variety and task identity are negatively associated with alienation. Moreover, the results revealed that alienation is negatively related to performance as rated by employees' supervisors, and positively related to deviant behaviour at work, whereby there was a 12-month lag in the measurement of deviance. These latter findings are particularly significant because they offer insight regarding the consequences of work alienation, especially since the outcomes are measured longitudinally.

One theoretical implication of the present study is that Marx's conceptualization of alienation is valid, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Specifically, our results revealed that task variety and task identity were inversely related to alienation. Therefore, individuals who enjoy a variety of tasks, and who can also see how their work is connected to the wider contours of work are less alienated.

Our results regarding the antecedents of alienation may spur future research, especially when considered alongside those reported by Nair and Vohra (2010). The two studies converge in that autonomy was not significantly related to alienation in both studies. However the results diverge in that the present study found that task variety was significantly related to alienation, whereas Nair and Vohra (2010) reported a non-significant relationship between the two. Conversely, we report a non-significant relationship between social support and alienation, whereas Nair and Vohra (2010) reported a significant negative relationship between satisfaction with work relationships and alienation.

A possible reason for these discrepant findings is that the sample used in the present study was drawn from the UK, whereas Nair and Vohra's (2010) sample was drawn from India. Research shows that Indian culture forwards a broader view of social responsibilities, such as caring for others, than does American culture (J. G. Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood,

1990). It may be that social support is not as important in alleviating alienation to people from Western cultures, such as the UK, as it is in more collectivistic cultures, such as in India.

The present results add to the job design literature that shows that elements of job design have implications for people's attitudes. However, the present study goes beyond the scholarly realm of job design by examining alienation, a construct that incorporates the social and political spheres. Why is doing so important? Beynon et al. (2002) stated that society is increasingly characterised by a sense of 'disconnected capitalism' whereby structural tendencies within capital markets disrupt established patterns of relations between employers and labour. Thompson (2003) argued that it is therefore an imperative that management scholars look outside the boundaries of the organisation to understand the employment relationship. The study of alienation opens the conversation for discussing work-related attitudes that are influenced by factors both internal and external to the organisation. Doing so provides a more veridical account of the employment relationship. Moreover, like Harris and Ogbonna (2010), the present study is an empirical response to calls for research to weave more contemporary management ideas with Marxist conceptions of the labour process.

A more managerialist approach to the question of why one should pay attention to alienation is found in the results of the present study. The results show that alienation was positively related to deviant behaviours. This suggests that managers should attempt to alleviate alienation amongst workers in order to reduce costs associated with deviant activities. Our findings regarding performance are of particular interest to organisations as well. Increasing job performance is among the most theoretically and practically important problems in organisational research (Staw, 1984). Examining objective performance is critical to advance theory, and for practitioners, it is crucial to utilise scarce resources (Bommer, Johnson, Rich, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 1995). The fact that the present study

uses objective performance measures (e.g., supervisor ratings) increases the validity of our arguments.

One of the potential reasons for the lack of interest in alienation is the ambiguity over what alienation is, and what a person is alienated from (e.g., Shantz et al., 2014). Although some progress has been made to develop new measures of alienation (Nair & Vohra, 2009), future research should continue to explore how alienation should be operationalised. Specifically, more research is needed to establish reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of a measure. Since our findings show that alienation exhibits a positive relationship with deviance, and a negative relationship with performance, as rated by supervisors, the present study is a step towards meeting this end.

Future research should also determine other drivers of alienation. For instance, an individual who is overqualified for a job may experience heightened work alienation. With increasing education attainment in Euro Western society (Eurostat, 2003; NAAL, 1993), and the global recession of 2009-11, many employees have become overqualified for their job. These employees may be more likely to perceive that the demands of their jobs are not commensurate with their ability, and that their job does not allow them to use the skills they possess. In turn, they may experience alienation (Mitchell, 1984).

Future research should also examine the extent to which an employee's job role (i.e. professionals, managers, administrative staff, manual workers etc.) influences the strength of the relationships between the antecedents of alienation and alienation. Given the size of our sample, we could not adequately test this hypothesis in our study. However, a post-hoc correlation analysis by 3 job roles (professional, manager, the rest of the sample) hinted that job role might influence the relative importance of each antecedent of alienation. Specifically, the results showed that the correlations were all significant and nearly identical between alienation and autonomy for professionals (-.30), managers (-.32) and the rest of the sample (-

.34). Although the correlations between alienation and task variety (-.21; -.29; -.35) and social support (-.24; -.28; -.45) were all significantly negative, they were weakest in the professional category, and strongest in the rest of the sample. We found more pronounced differences for task identity; it was negatively correlated with alienation for professionals (-.32) and other groups (-.27), yet the negative correlation was not significant for managers (-.11). A qualitative investigation may be best suited to examine the interactions among job roles and drivers of alienation in order to provide a clear understanding of this pattern of results.

Future research is also needed to establish the generalizability of our findings. The present study was carried out in a single organisation in the UK. Furthermore, all of our measures, except performance, were self-reported. This limits the conclusions that can be made regarding causality and also raises concerns about common method bias. With respect to causality, the linkages found in the present study are consistent with the literature on alienation (Marx, 1844/1963, 1844/1969) and work design theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Results from our analyses show that the measures used in the present study are distinct. Nevertheless, future research needs to employ longitudinal designs to provide more definitive conclusions regarding the relationship amongst the structural and social conditions of work and alienation, and alienation and deviance.

Although our measure of performance was sourced from employees' supervisors, thereby mitigating concerns regarding common method variance and social desirability effects, the measure of performance employed in the current study has its limitations. For instance, it was a global measure of performance; we were unable to ascertain which features of 'performance' supervisors considered in their assessment of employees. Moreover, a 3-point scale is arguably narrow; a finer-grained scale would provide a more telling standard deviation. For instance, an employee who scored a "C" on performance might perform

‘moderately’ or ‘very’ poor. In future, researchers should employ either a behavioural observation scale or behavioural anchored rating scale when assessing performance, both of which include a number of performance dimensions, and a larger range of options (e.g., 5 or 7 point scales) (see Latham, Almost, Mann, & Moore, 2005).

The practical implications for management also relate to work design. Organisations should design jobs that include task variety and task identity to reduce alienation at work. Tonks and Nelson (2008) argued that HRM practices that have a long-term orientation aimed at fostering organisational commitment and identification assist in alleviating employee alienation. However, organisations that adopt HRM practices that are focused on the short term, and include quantifiable strategies, emphasise individualism and/or assume that workers have unitarist goals, find it difficult, if not impossible, to ease alienation amongst employees.

In conclusion, the present study has demonstrated that task variety and task identity are negatively associated with alienation. It has also revealed that an employee who is alienated is more likely to behave in a deviant way and under-perform at work relative to those who are not alienated. These results may serve as an indication to both management researchers and practitioners that alienation is a worthy concept for exploration.

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